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PRELIMINARY REVISED

REPORT OF COMMITTEE ON

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# PUBLIC INFORMATION

## *The President's* HIGHWAY SAFETY CONFERENCE

*Held in*

WASHINGTON, D. C.

JUNE 1, 2, and 3, 1949

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# *Report of Committee on*

## **Public Information**

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### **OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE**

The President's Highway Safety Conference has recommended a community and State program urgently needed to help prevent traffic accidents.

Without exception, all phases of this program depend for complete effectiveness on the intelligent and continuing support of the American people.

Such support is not generated in a vacuum. It springs from a full knowledge and understanding of the problem, and has its roots in the individual recognition by each citizen of his personal responsibilities. Informed support for the highway safety program demands, therefore, the widest possible dissemination of the facts about highway safety.

What are these facts?

For purposes of clarifying the scope of this study, they have been grouped into three general categories:

First, traffic accidents. The public should be fully and promptly informed as to the number of accidents, where and how they occur, and why. Nation-wide statistics are not enough. Much more important is information about what is happening in our own neighborhood, our community and State.

Second, the social and economic effects of highway accidents. How serious is the problem and who is affected by it? What do traffic accidents cost in money, in lost time, in transportation inefficiency and curtailed production? What price are we paying for carelessness in blood, broken homes, suffering, and death?

Finally, the public must know how highway accidents can be prevented, and what is being done about it. This wide category embraces all of the activities, both public and private, which The President's Highway Safety Conference recommends as an action program.

The dissemination of these facts will help build support for highway safety in two ways:

1. By giving to the individual driver and pedestrian the informa-

tion needed to protect himself from accident, to develop proper driving attitudes, and encourage him to accept personal responsibility for the solution of this problem. The information should be specific, simple, and clear.

Acceptance of individual responsibility is the foundation of the safety structure, and in the judgment of this Committee cannot be emphasized too much. Many people recognize the problem only as it applies to the other fellow. The first reaction of the average driver following an accident is usually dazed surprise that these things apply to him, too.

2. By promoting a wider understanding of the necessary enforcement, educational, and engineering activities, thus making possible the active public support essential to their effectiveness.

It is the purpose here to indicate as far as possible whose responsibility it is to disseminate the facts; to appraise the informational job now being done; to offer a number of specific suggestions the Committee believes will be of practical usefulness to those who must carry forward this essential phase of the highway safety program; and, finally, to summarize the report in three general recommendations.

## DISCUSSION

The public information objectives in highway safety can be simply stated, but their achievement is an enormous task of staggering complexity.

We live in a Nation which has three-fourths of the world's motor vehicles—enough to transport our entire population at one time with room to spare—and a mile of road for every square mile of area. Over this vast communications network, which laces together the remotest hamlets in the land, travel reaches astronomical proportions, measured in hundreds of billions of passenger miles per year. More than 40 million Americans own and operate individually the vehicles in this transportation system.

The curtailment of accidents in highway travel is an undertaking as complex as the transportation system itself. In spite of wishful thinking on the subject, there is no short cut to safety; no magic panacea that will solve the problem overnight.

Permanent reduction of the accident rate comes from impartial enforcement of traffic regulations; from modern engineering of roads and vehicles; from education of drivers and pedestrians; from uniform rules of the road; and from all the other measures which will emerge as recommendations out of this Conference. It takes a balanced and continuing program to get results, backed up by the public and based on the willingness of each citizen to do his part individually on foot and behind the steering wheel.



Each one of the official safety activities, a sector in the war against accidents, needs public understanding and support. It is easy to think of the public knowing too little about safety. It is difficult to conceive of the public knowing too much. The job of disseminating the facts is as broad, and must be made as continuous, as the highway safety program itself.

It is clear that we are dealing here with something more than a publicity campaign or a transient flurry of promotion. Both may at times be needed. But what the situation calls for is a continuous and large-scale effort, encompassing all the elements of highway safety.

### ***Whose Responsibility Is It?***

The public information job needed in traffic safety will be done most effectively if responsibility is shared three ways:

1. By the governmental agencies that have legal responsibilities relating to the program. Among them are the legislative bodies, administrative officials, educators, engineers, and enforcement authorities.

2. By the media of public information, including the newspapers, magazines, house organs, and other publications; the radio broadcasting stations; the motion pictures; outdoor advertising; posters, car cards, window displays, and other display media.

3. By the volunteers in the cause of safety—the civic, professional, and fraternal organizations, the business and industrial organizations which have an economic stake in accident prevention, and all other groups of men and women dedicated wholly or in part to the cause of traffic accident prevention.

In addition to these channels of organized effort, each individual, of course, can contribute importantly to this phase of the safety program through personal contacts.

The responsibility is clear in the case of public officials to make readily available to the public all pertinent facts concerning their highway safety activities.

Usually the task is that of assembling, tabulating, or analyzing information, and of providing facilities to expedite its flow to the proper media for public distribution. The job may involve the publication of materials, the showing of films, the preparation of speeches, and other similar activities. A number of departments in local and State governments are concerned, and coordination of their work in this field is necessary to avoid overlapping and confusion.

The judicious expenditure of public funds where needed for this purpose is fully justified in the interest of saving life, limb, and property. As a general rule, the value of a safety information activity can be judged by these criteria:

Does it provide information or carry an appeal to the public that will encourage safer driving or walking practices?

Does it make available the facts people must have for informed support of some necessary part of the highway safety program?

The responsibility of the media of public information in safety arises out of their obligation to serve the general welfare. Traffic accidents constitute a grave menace to the public safety and exact a heavy toll from every community. The activities of publications, radio, motion pictures, outdoor advertising, and other media in dramatizing the problem, and in developing intelligent support for solving it, represent the highest type of public service.

The task is not restricted to critical short-range problems. Major contributions also can be made to safety through long-range programs in engineering, education, and enforcement. Progress often is slow, but benefits are permanent. Continued support is needed for long-term planning which, over a period of years, will result in the elimination of physical hazards to highway travel, in the improvement of administrative efficiency in traffic control, and in the adequate education of a new generation of motorists and drivers to their responsibilities in accident prevention.

The opportunity for public service by organizations of all kinds is readily apparent. The dissemination of facts about highway safety to the public and to their own memberships should be a major activity of all the community, State, and national organizations which enlist themselves in this cause.

Churches and fraternal organizations, for example, can contribute much to a better understanding of the safety problem, particularly its social implications. Universal courtesy and good sportsmanship in traffic, and simple manifestations of the spirit of brotherhood, could go far toward eliminating needless accidents. Certainly there are moral issues involved in wanton carelessness which has life-and-death consequences for others.

Through the printed page, over the air, along the streets and highways, and in other ways the purveyors of goods and services go to millions of citizens every hour with commercial messages. During the war, advertising rendered outstanding public service in the war bond campaigns, recruiting, salvage, and in scores of other emergency programs. Since the war, advertising has done a great deal in support of the safety program.

The daily traffic casualty lists offer to advertisers a new challenge and a new opportunity for even larger contributions to the welfare of the country.

To this end, it is urged that all advertisers cooperate with this program, emphasizing in whole or in part the importance of highway safety, particularly as it relates to their business.

## ***How Well Is the Job Being Done?***

For many years the Nation has made encouraging progress in reducing the highway fatality rate. This achievement would not have been possible without the support of the magazines, newspapers, radio stations, and other media.

Today in articles and editorials, in pictures and posters, in radio dramatizations and in numerous other ways, the challenge of street and highway accidents is seen and heard. Safety is approaching a high tide of public attention.

But an inventory discloses some minus factors:

a. The picture is spotty. Some communities and States are active; others are not. Many magazines are doing much for highway safety; others very little. The same is true of radio, newspapers, and the other media, and of organizations throughout the country.

What we need is a hard-hitting program in every State and community, supported aggressively by all media and organizations.

b. Well-intentioned public-information efforts sometimes fail because they are not properly coordinated with the current, organized community or State safety program. They appear to be going off on a tangent, and are not geared to the common effort. Close cooperation of information agencies with the official program is essential to get concerted action and maximum results.

Failure to localize public-information activities is a typical illustration of this lack of coordination. Nation-wide statistics and generalized statements on safety have a purpose, but they can never be adequate substitutes in the community for local facts, names, and activities.

c. Activities too often are spasmodic, lacking the planned continuity necessary to sustain them over a long period. Safety is hot today, forgotten completely tomorrow.

In some instances, this is due to the fact that the community or State safety activities are spasmodic. The information job is essentially one of reporting to and advising the public. Where enforcement, engineering, or educational programs are conducted sporadically, the supporting information activities tend to follow the same inconstant pattern.

But there are many other cases where public authorities and safety groups do carry on, day after day, the necessary safety job, with inadequate support on the public-information side.

In these cases, information activities are allowed to follow the path of least resistance. Occasionally, they flare up, when public interest in the subject is high. Usually, this follows a particularly shocking tragedy, or a series of them, on the streets or highways in the area. Then the program loses momentum, and dwindles down again to virtually nothing.

Results from this type of effort are limited. The lasting result can be obtained only when the public authorities, civic organizations, the press, the radio, and other media of public contact organize to maintain a continuing program of safety education.

### ***How Can the Job Be Done Better?***

While the problem of sustaining public interest in highway safety is admittedly difficult, it is by no means insuperable.

The broad scope and complexity of the subject is, in this respect, a valuable asset, because it provides a rich variety of themes, touching the interests of people in all groups and ages.

The child crossing the street, the care of an automobile, the training of competent administrative and engineering personnel, the policeman at the corner, the designing of safety into a rural highway intersection, the development of good citizenship through safety instructions in the school, the burden of emergency cases on local hospitals, the training of automobile, bus, and truck drivers—these and countless other subjects all are part of the program.

It is necessary to repeat somehow the fundamentals of highway safety over and over. But in a country where more than a million trucks are owned by farmers, where doctors drive on the average about 35,000 miles a year in their cars, and where more than 4 million children ride to school every day in busses, it is not necessary to tell the story the same way every time. There is plenty of room for freshness and variety, and for change of pace.

The resourcefulness and ingenuity of the men and women who put out our newspapers, edit our magazines, and produce our movies and radio shows will provide the final answer to the problem. They have the "know-how" it takes to do the job. Once having accepted seriously the challenge of highway accidents, they will find, in cooperation with safety organizations and public officials, the ways and means of overcoming all obstacles that stand in the way of their doing an outstanding job of saving lives.

It is not possible here to specify the activities which each group or agency should undertake. That will depend upon which organization is doing it; what facilities it has for the job; whether the coverage is local, State, or national; the status of the safety program in the area served, and its particular needs at the time.



But from past experience in this field the following nine general principles have been distilled which may have value as guideposts to action in communities and States:

1. Activities should be keyed to current safety events whenever possible. For example, a talk explaining the new enforcement policy of the local police is likely to contribute more to accident prevention in the community than one dealing with generalized appeals for carefulness. This type of program also will help get public support for particular safety projects at a time when that support is most needed to make them effective.

2. Cooperate in the promotion of special events. Special emphasis programs have been effective on pedestrian safety, checking of brakes, seasonal hazards, and in meeting special problems in areas of a city or State. The Red Cross first-aid stations and mobile units, in addition to helping the injured, also can emphasize accident prevention in their promotional and publicity activities. A four-story neon-lighted thermometer was erected recently in one city to record the community's "deathless days" in traffic. This promotion event created the opportunity for many informational activities related to the community's traffic situation.

3. Tell the story in human terms. Make it apply personally to those addressed, and don't count on safety's importance alone to win it an audience. It has to be interesting as well. This point was underscored recently by one knowledgeable editor who, when asked how the highway safety story could be put across to the public, replied: "Mug it up!"

4. Make the program selective, in accordance with particular community needs. If the police are tightening up on signal and stop-sign jumpers, for example, emphasize the number of accidents that are happening as a result of those violations. Getting this information, the public will give the police the cooperation they need. The public also will understand better and respect the protective function of well-engineered traffic control devices.

5. Put the facts to work. Whenever possible, tie up the causes and effects of an accident with the press and radio reports of its occurrence. This may not always be feasible. But whenever it is, the report should include reference to the contributing factors in the accident, such as violation of the law, defective equipment, or hazardous weather and road conditions. Accident facts have their greatest educational impact when they are news. A radio station in one large city, for example, has found it possible, cooperating with the police and community safety organization, to put the facts to work in a regular dramatization of the "Accident of the Week," which contains much valuable information for pedestrians and motorists.



6. Libraries can cooperate in many ways, as for example in the display of safety materials, the use of book marks containing safety materials, the use of book marks containing safety messages, and by providing to the public and to safety speakers reference services and information.

7. "Scare" promotion—the use of gruesome pictures, statistics, and other blood-curdling materials to shock people—definitely has a place. But its effects are not long-lasting, and if employed too often the technique loses its value altogether. Sometimes the "shock" approach is useful at the beginning of a program, to stir initial interest. It can serve a useful purpose in such cases, provided that out of the interest created something constructive is evolved which will carry on the program. Safety is a day-after-day job, whereas scare promotion is effective only if infrequently used.

8. Seasonal hazards to traffic afford good opportunities for special emphasis programs.

At vacation time, for example, children begin playing in the streets. Storms or icy conditions in the winter present special driving hazards. These are opportune times to remind motorists of the need for special carefulness, and to provide them with specific and practical information that will assist them to avoid risks.

Holiday concentrations of traffic likewise offer promotion possibilities. Safety contests, with awards, can stir interest if properly handled and like other activities of this kind generate publicity and promotion which serve to call the problem to public attention.

9. Names make news, and they don't even have to be the names of flesh-and-blood characters. They can be Dick Tracy, of the comics, for example, or the Lone Ranger, of radio fame. When news is made by comedians, movie stars, famous athletes and pilots, and other personalities with large numbers of followers, then it is efficacious news indeed. The cooperation of these bellwethers in public interest can contribute substantially to the effectiveness of the safety program.

In the neighborhood, as in the Nation, names of prominent people command attention, and their leadership in safety materially aids the information activities.

10. By far the biggest name to the average person, however, is his own. After that, a member of the family, a neighbor, a friend or associate. And the most interesting places are the home, neighborhood, community, State, and Nation, usually in that order.

Hence the localizing of safety information is desirable from the standpoint of interest. Localized information also is specific, and carries much more punch than generalizations.

Similarly, visual presentations often are more forceful than words in illustrating driving techniques and conveying other information. Mo-

tion pictures, still pictures, slides, cartoons, and diagrams all have a contribution to make in telling the highway safety story.

One newspaper, for example, selected the "50 worst intersections" in its city—those with the most accidents over a period of years—and published a series of "intersection diagrams" showing how the accidents occurred. This series had particular appeal to the neighborhoods in which the intersections were located. It succeeded also in developing invaluable public support for the community's traffic engineering program then getting under way.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the foregoing considerations, and because of the critical safety problem due to the constantly increasing volume of traffic, the Committee makes the following recommendations:

1. That public officials having jurisdiction over the several phases of highway safety take adequate steps wherever needed to make available to the public on a continuing basis all pertinent facts about highway safety, cooperating in this endeavor with the media of public information and interested supporting organizations.

2. That the owners and management of magazines, newspapers, and other publications; of motion-picture producing and distributing companies; of radio broadcasting stations and networks, and of outdoor advertising, graphics, and other media, pledge themselves in the public interest to full support of the highway safety program recommended by this Conference, cooperating actively to that end with public officials, interested organizations, and others engaged in support of the program.

3. That civic and professional groups, and membership, business, and industrial organizations having a stake in safe highway transportation, and all groups of public-spirited men and women enlisted in the program of organized public support for the objectives of this Conference carry on to the full limit of their facilities appropriate activities that will get the story of traffic accident prevention before their members and the public, cooperating with public officials and the media of public information to the end that the job will be properly coordinated for maximum effectiveness.

4. That in each State the agency designated to conduct the program recommended by the Committee on Organized Public Support of this Conference utilize trained personnel to promote highway safety through all public information channels.

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The final Conference-approved edition of this report will contain a complete list of the members of the Committee on Public Information.